

Gaining Steam, Finally

CTA's Skokie Swift may get long-sought Old Orchard stop

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Talked about for four decades but with nothing accomplished, an expansion of the Skokie Swift rapid transit line could hardly have moved any slower.

But with the long-sought addition of a new downtown station on Oakton Street looking like a sure thing, Skokie officials believe the time might have come to extend the Swift, also known as the Chicago Transit Authority's Yellow Line, to a new train station near Old Orchard mall.

Any extension is still years away at best, but with CTA officials going to Skokie this week for a site survey, village leaders say they have never been more optimistic.

"It's long-range, but it's more in the realm of possibility than ever before," said Skokie Mayor George Van Dusen, who estimated the cost of the Old Orchard extension at \$100 million. "The success we've had in one area perhaps breeds a little bit of optimism that we can succeed in the second one."

The CTA's last expansion in the North Shore was in 1964, when it began running the Swift on the tracks of the old North Shore railroad, which went bust in the mid-1950s.

Proposals to extend the line go back to at least 1965, Tribune archives show, when the Skokie Valley Transportation Council, an ad hoc committee of North Shore towns, recommended an Old Orchard stop.

In 1985 a Tribune editorial warned that suburban traffic would worsen and asked, "Whatever happened to the plans to extend the Skokie Swift from Dempster Street to Old Orchard?"

Until recently, not much.

But in 2003 Skokie did a study that helped persuade the CTA to include the project in a request for federal "New Starts" funding earmarked for congestion-easing transit projects that year. Now the agency has launched a formal study process, and consultants will travel to the village to get a tour of what has changed since the '03 study.

"We've worked hard to push for support among congressional delegations and others to get on this list and to work to secure funding," said CTA spokeswoman Robyn Ziegler.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who pushed for funding of the CTA study, spoke confidently.

"When the first project is complete [at Oakton Street], we'll go all the way to Old Orchard," she predicted. "I think this is going to be an enormous boost to the local economy."

For now, the Skokie Swift runs non-stop between Howard Street in Chicago and Dempster Street in Skokie, with about 2,500 riders a day boarding at Dempster.

The \$15 million stop at Oakton, near the Illinois Science + Technology Park, could debut as early as 2008.

Three possible sites

Skokie planners have identified three possible sites for an Old Orchard station: on the west side of the Edens Expressway, where the old North Shore line used to run; just east of the expressway, next to Niles North High School; and in the mall's parking lot, near Bloomingdale's.

The line would probably need to be elevated or laid out in some way to keep the trains from crossing busy thoroughfares at street level, especially Dempster, said Steve Marciani, the village's planning supervisor.

Officials believe demand for the added stop is strong, as Skokie stores, hotels and businesses located north of Golf Road employ more than 11,000 people, he said.

The new line would whisk shoppers, employees and others to Westfield Shoppingtown Old Orchard, the Cook County courthouse and other nearby office and retail developments.

"The whole corridor is very busy," Van Dusen said. "A lot of employers have told us they would like it because they pick up their employees at Dempster."

At Old Orchard, the idea went over well among workers, managers and shoppers.

Carrie Dunham, manager at The Limited, said not having a viable rapid transit system makes it difficult for her to recruit workers who don't live nearby.

Many of her employees live in Chicago but would prefer working at The Limited store at Water Tower Place because they can ride the CTA to work, Dunham said.

"I think [the extension] is a good idea," she said. "We don't have public transportation out here. There's a bus, but it stops at a certain point and stops running at night."

The Yellow Line doesn't only shuttle people from Chicago to the suburbs. Philip Luu, 17, said he lives in Skokie but rides the Yellow Line to Chicago to hang out with friends and volunteer.

Because the train doesn't stop near his school, Luu, a senior at Niles North, takes a bus to Dempster, then rides the Swift to Howard. There, he switches to the Red Line, which carries him south into the city.

The Yellow Line extension would eliminate the bus leg of the journey, which Luu said he would welcome, especially in the winter or when buses are running late.

"That would really be nice," said Luu's friend Mohini Ghale, 18, of Skokie. "We'd have a straight line to the Red Line and to go downtown."

Skokie, meanwhile, "would like to see public transportation because it takes cars off the road," Van Dusen said. "Anything we can do to ease congestion is a good thing."

Funding issues remain

The extension's estimated cost would include engineering studies, equipment and land acquisition, Van Dusen said.

The \$100 million estimate is for an above-ground line, he said, and tunneling would bump it higher.

It's too early to worry about exactly how to fund the project, village officials said, but it's clear the federal and state governments would have to pick up the lion's share of the tab.

Before the CTA can secure federal funding, the agency must demonstrate that a formal process of planning and design has been followed.

Ziegler said the extension proposal is in its earliest stage, known as alternatives analysis. In this phase, engineers study "traffic generators"--where people live, where they go and how they get there--as well as possible routes, station locations, ridership estimates, costs and what other transportation options are available.

The analysis takes at least two years to complete and is one of four the CTA has in the works, along with proposed extensions of the Orange and Red Lines and creation of a new downtown

Circle Line.